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From Collar to Beard

The triumph of Republican conservatism has produced remarkable cultural changes. Who, for example, is the man everyone now loves to hiss? Fidel Castro, of course.

Of course. Great political movements always require a villain-in-chief, a hobgoblin who can be summoned to revive the faithful when their juices have grown sluggish with too much triumph. When liberalism and Democrats ruled the nation, the villain-in-chief was Herbert Hoover.

Fidel Castro is the new Herbert Hoover.

Democrats and liberalism could have had Fidel Castro themselves at one time, but they were afraid he was bad luck.

President Kennedy (Democrat, liberal by today's definition) got into a terrible mess trying to destroy Fidel Castro militarily at the Bay of Pigs.

Afterward President Kennedy let the C.I.A. try to make Fidel Castro's beard fall out. It didn't work. So he let the C.I.A. traffic with Mafia hit men to murder Fidel Castro. Another failure.

After that the Democrats felt jinxed by Fidel Castro. Sure, on political campaigns they went to Cuban Miami and said they hated Fidel Castro, but that was not like the old days when they crisscrossed the continent getting the masses to hiss Herbert Hoover for causing the Great Depression.

Herbert Hoover was good luck for Democrats and liberalism, and a curse to Republicans and conservatism. At the end, when time had done its awful work, and most voters probably didn't know Herbert Hoover from J. Edgar, and thought the Great Depression was a geological curiosity on the moon, liberalism and Democrats still could not produce a new villain-in-chief.

Fidel Castro was there for conservatism to take, and it made him the new Herbert Hoover. What is his villainy? He is exporting Communism. You must not ask what that means, mustn't say, "But haven't bearded, long-winded men been exporting Communism ever since Karl Marx?"

The beauty of having a really top-drawer villain-in-chief is that people who ask sensible questions can be hissed just as enthusiastically for being sensible as the villain-in-chief

can be hissed for being villainous. If you are a wrinkled person you may recall yourself hissing the occasional rational inquirer who said, "But precisely what did Herbert Hoover do that caused the Great Depression?"

These things, things like changing villains-in-chief, are cultural things, not rational things. They are not to be thought about; they are to be enjoyed as pleasurable evidence of democracy's ability to endure, no matter what you hit it with.

There are other fascinating cultural changes. The old bleeding-heart liberal, for instance, is being driven off the political map by victorious conservatism just as effectively as neighborhood shoe-repair shops are being pushed off Manhattan Island by triumphant real-estate-ism.

The bleeding-heart liberal is now replaced by the stony-heart conservative. The difference? In the old days, if a broken-down horse collapsed in the street the bleeding-heart liberal lobbied the Government to set up a national network of nursing stables where broken-down horses could spend their declining years in comfort and dignity.

Nowadays, seeing the collapsed horse, the stony-heart conservative orders a study to determine how many broken-down horses per week collapse at that location and, if the figure is promising, borrows capital to build a glue factory on the site.

The knee-jerk liberal is not quite gone, but almost. How conservatives used to love getting together at the club and laughing about the latest knee-jerk liberal tomfoolery. Little did they know that political nature abhors a vacuum, so that after conservatism did away with knee-jerk liberals, the country raised up armies of knee-jerk conservatives.

It was only last spring that triumphant conservatives were sneering at the usual knee-jerk liberal reluctance

to punish Nicaragua for letting Fidel Castro export Communism. Hard-headed conservatism required us to be actively interventionist in the cause of democracy, did it not?

It did not. Since an actively interventionist economic policy toward South Africa was proposed this summer, knee-jerk conservatism has made nonsense of logic. For reasons which conservatives will sit up all night explaining to you if you are not careful to have a prior engagement, conservatism approves repressive government in South Africa and detests repressive government in Nicaragua. As the politicians say in Chicago, "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose." □